

What Makes Consumer–Brand Relationships Bad? Enlightening Relational Negativity

Maja Golf-Papez, University of Sussex, United Kingdom

Michael Beverland, University of Sussex, United Kingdom

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In the past two decades, a considerable amount of research has been published on the relationships formed between consumers and brands. These studies mostly consider the bright side of brand relationships, with scholars idealizing the marital brand relationship style or any type of strong, easily strengthened or positive relationship (Fournier 2009; Fournier and Alvarez 2013). This focus on positive relationships seems somewhat divorced from reality, since consumer–brand relationships can be “troublesome, irking, unpleasant, aggravating, difficult, and problematic” (Spitzberg and Cupach 2007, 8). In fact, such negative brand relationships are more prevalent (Fournier and Alvarez 2013) and more salient (Baumeister et al. 2001) than positive ones.

Although there has been far less research on negative brand relationships than on positive ones, a growing body of literature analyzes the dark side of consumer–brand relationships. Studies have sought to examine, for instance, brand hate (Zarantonello et al. 2016), unliked strong brands (Veloutsou, Chatzipanagiotou, and Christodoulides 2020), and strong relationships that have been transgressed (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004). In addition, negatively valenced relationships are included in the recent customer–brand relationships model (see Park, Eisingerich, and Park 2013) and consumer–smart object interactions model (Novak and Hoffman 2019). Notwithstanding the insightfulness of all these studies, very little is known about how the diverse forms of consumer–brand relationship (strong or weak, and positive, negative, or neutral) actually become negative.

To answer the calls for “a science of negative relationships concerning the negative outcomes, processes, states, and attributes of consumers’ relationships with brands” (Fournier and Alvarez 2013, 253) and for an overarching theory that will explain what “causes changes in relationships” (MacInnis and Folkes 2017, 366), we explore the phenomenon of *relational negativity*. We use the term ‘relational negativity’ to refer to the negativity (negative attitudes) that arises within or because of consumer–brand relationships. Our specific research questions are: (1) How does relational negativity come about? In other words, what makes relationships, however temporarily, bad? and (2) What does the negativity lead to?

To understand the negative aspects of brand relationships, we conducted image-elicitation in-depth interviews with 25 participants. Prior to and during the interviews, participants were asked to find pictures that represented their feelings and thoughts about three negative personal brand experiences. In total, we discussed 103 pictures and 75 brand experiences. Using Fiske’s (1992) relational models as our analytical lens, we performed iterative interpretive analyses, focusing particularly on the actions, perceptions, and conditions that caused the negativity within the particular type of relationship and the outcomes of this negativity. To ensure the credibility of our findings, we used data and within-method triangulation and member checks.

Our analyses revealed the usefulness of understanding the interactions between consumers and brands in terms of four of Fiske’s (1992) discrete relational models (i.e. communal sharing, authority ranking, equality matching, and market pricing). Interactions governed by the communal-sharing model were based on strong consumer identification with a brand. Reminiscent of Aggarwal’s (2004) and Miller, Fournier, and Allen’s (2012) communal relationships, communal-sharing relationships include relationships in which a consumer genuinely supports and cares about the brand. Authority-ranking relations were characterized by the consumer’s perception of being subordinated to or dependent on the brand. Equality-matching relations included balanced, reciprocal exchanges between a

consumer and a brand. Finally, in the brand market-pricing relations, roughly corresponding to Aggarwal's (2004) and Miller, Fournier, and Allen's (2012) exchange relationships, a consumer thought about a brand mainly in terms of its value for money.

In general, our informants related to each brand in terms of one predominant model. The negativity that arose in the brand relationships could be explained by: (1) the brand directly violating the rules and expectations of the enacted relational model (i.e., *within-model negativity*), (2) the brand enacting a different relational model than the consumer and therefore, indirectly violating the relational rules (i.e., *between-model negativity*), and (3) the negative aspects of being in a particular type of brand relationship (i.e., *by-model negativity*). These three different types of relational negativity influenced the consumer's decision to maintain or terminate the current relationship and whether to start using a competing brand.

This research contributes to our understanding of negative brand relationships. We demonstrate the fluidity and multidimensionality of relational negativity by illustrating how some consumer–brand relationships have never been positive, how some consumer–brand relationships become negative, and how some seemingly negative consumer–brand relationships are, in fact, positive. The presented framework with the four consumer–brand relationship types and the governing rules may give marketing and brand managers an alternative understanding of how consumers relate to their brands and what the brand's 'must dos' and 'shouldn't dos' are if they want to keep or fire the customer, respectively.

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